

Whoever Believes, Part 2 John 3:17-21

6 April 2014

[Note: This is not a complete transcript of what was actually preached. It is Tim's manuscript, which tends to be about 80% of the actual sermon. Some common abbreviations in these notes are: "NB" = *nota bene*, "note well" / "+" = an illustration / "→" = an application / "BTW" = "By the way" / "Cf." = cross-reference / "I.e." = "In other words" / "b/c" = because / "E.G." = for example.]

Turn back to John 3, as we work our way slowly through this most famous chapter in the Bible. – Let me say that I have especially sensed your prayers for me lately as your preacher; and I ask that you not cease praying for me, even now during this sermon, and for my hearers.

Give title – 7x "believe" is used. – Let me begin with one of church history's famous conversion stories:

On 6 Jan, 1850, a snowstorm almost crippled the city of Colchester, England. – A teenage boy was unable to get to his church. – So instead, he made his way to a nearby Methodist chapel. – The boy had heard these people singing before – they sang so loud it made his head hurt! – But still he went in.

Only to learn that their pastor wasn't there. – So an ill-prepared layman stood in for him. – His text was Isa. 45:22, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth."

For many months, this teen boy had been miserable, and under deep conviction of sin. – He'd been raised in church, and his father & grandfather were preachers. – Yet he knew he was not truly born again.

The lay preacher on that cold morning had little to say; so he kept repeating the text, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." – He said, 'A man need not go to college to learn to look. Anyone can look – a child can look!' – Then he pointed directly at that teen boy seated in the back:

'Young man, you look very miserable. Young man, look to Jesus Christ! I can see you are in trouble. You will never get out of trouble until you look to Christ! Look, look, look to Christ – it's all you must do!'

And that's what he did – on that unlikely day, that young man looked to Christ with a living faith, and was saved. – His name?...Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who became the famous London preacher. – Spurgeon later wrote of that day of his conversion:

...I saw at once the way of salvation. Oh, how I did leap for joy at that moment! I know not what else [the preacher] said, I did not take much notice of it. I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, they only looked and were healed. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard this word, 'Look!' what a charming word it seemed to me! Oh, I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away; and in heaven I will look on still in my joy unutterable."

That's what John 3 is all about! – "Whoever believes" – there is life in one look – You need not perish forever, eternal life is freely offered, for *any* who will believe on Christ. – O that God would save a young Spurgeon in this room today!

Stand & Read vv. 9-21 & Pray:

***SIX PORTRAITS of Christ, the Saviour of the World, calling all to come to Him by faith alone (forsaking all unbelief):**

1. vv. 11-13, Jesus Coming Down (from Heaven, as the Revealer)
2. vv. 14-15, Jesus Lifted Up (Crucified, Risen & Exalted)
3. v. 16, Jesus GIVEN by the Father

4. v. 17, Jesus SENT by the Father.

Jesus did not come merely in His own name. – He was sent. – He received His commission, His brief, His job description, and His message – all these originated with His Father, not Him. (As we've seen already: v. 13, "descended from Heaven"; v. 16, given by the Father.)

v. 17 – NB, this is a very worldly verse: "world" used 3x in one verse. – You must remember what John normally means when he uses this word, "world". – It's not just the 'great outdoors' or the beauty of nature or the universe. – Oh no:

For John, world (*kosmos*) usually = a very negative image: As we're about to see, the world of Christ-rejecting, Light-hating, darkness-loving humanity. – Sound like the kind of place you'd want to send your son?...

Hardly! – More like the kind of place you'd want to destroy, to call down fire & brimstone upon, to get rid of once & for all. – YET instead we read: v. 17...

Now, John will go on to tell us in chp 5 & chp. 9 that Christ is God's appointed Judge and Executioner in this world (cf. 5:27; 9:39).

And that's exactly what the Jews expected Messiah to come and do – to judge all His enemies (but not the Jews of course) and to set the Jews free.

BUT instead we read these shocking words: v. 17...

I.e., Condemning was not the REASON God sent His Son. – It is a *consequence* of Christ coming, but it wasn't the cause. –

It was not God's anger that sent Jesus here. – Oh no, it was God's *love* that sent Jesus into this world:

Repeat: vv. 16a, 17...

As Christ will again say in 12:47, "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world."

OR as Jesus says to Zaccheus after calling him down out of the tree and saving him, Luke 19:10, "For the Son of man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Lk. 19:10)

+ Let me illustrate: Does the sun rise in order to produce shadows, or to give light?...

It rises to bring light; but shadows are an inevitable consequence. – If Christ comes to save, then those who refuse salvation must necessarily be condemned.

+ Once there was a young man who had such a huge fight with his dad that he left home. – He stayed in touch with Mom, and wanted very badly to come home for Christmas. – He realised his guilt & was ready to repent & ask Dad's forgiveness.

But he was afraid Dad wasn't ready and didn't want him back. Mom wrote to the son and urged him to come home, but he did not feel he could until he knew Dad had forgiven him.

Finally, there was no time for any more letters. – Mom wrote and said she would talk with Dad. – IF Dad had forgiven him, she would tie a white rag on the tree which grew right alongside the railroad tracks near their home, which he could see before the train reached the station. – If there was no rag, it would be better if he went on.

So the young man started home. – As the train drew near his home, he was so nervous he said to his friend who was traveling with him, "I can't bear to look. Sit in my place and look out the window. I'll tell you what the tree looks like and you tell me whether there is a rag on it or not."

So his friend changed places with him and looked out the window. – After a bit the friend said, "Oh yes, I see the tree." – The son asked, "Is there a white rag tied to it?" – For a moment the friend did not say anything. – Then he turned, and in a very gentle voice said, "There are white rags tied to *every limb of that tree!*"

Repeat: v. 17...

→Beloved, that's what God is saying here: 'O sinful, guilty world. I love you. I gave My only beloved Son, not to ruin you, but to redeem you. I sent Him to save you, not to judge you.'

'Why won't you come home? Pardon is promised to all who will repent & believe. Jesus paid it all on the cross. Receive His forgiveness. Put down your weapons. Be reconciled to Me through Christ. Only believe!'

5. v. 18, Jesus DIVIDES ALL humanity.

Before the gospel is preached, before Christ comes to a people, they are all one mass, all in the same category as lost & hellbound. Any distinctions among them are superficial and temporary. – They are but one great crowd of humanity. –

UNTIL they are confronted with the living Christ. – Then a great division occurs. – Remember, Jesus said that He did not come to bring peace, but a sword, to divide, to separate even the members of a household (Matt. 10:34).

When the gospel is preached, all people are divided into two groups, two distinct categories, all based on their response to Christ.

v. 18 – Here is the only distinction between people that matters eternally. – Not your age, gender, skin colour. – Not your income, or marital status, etc. – In the eyes of God, and in light of eternity, there are two categories of people, and only two: the acquitted, and the condemned; the justified, and the judged.

→In WHICH group are you? – Beloved, this is one of the plainest & clearest verses in all the Bible. – It is stated in the simplest language, so that you should never be confused about WHICH category you are in:

Repeat v. 18...

We hear the same absolute division in Jn. 5:24....

What is the only difference between the two groups? – NOT their education or their intellect, not their virtues or merits or personality.

No, only ONE difference between them: “Belief”, a word used 3x here in this one verse – whether they responded to the Lord Jesus Christ with a living faith or not.

Someone has called Jesus ‘The Man You Can’t Ignore’. – He is the great Unavoidable, the ultimate & final Fork in the road. – You cannot remain neutral about this Man:

Reread: v. 18a...

→Even as you hear me speak right now, Christ is confronting you (by His Spirit & His Word). – As He asked Peter long ago, so He puts the question to you, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mk. 8:27)

You must answer that question. – To avoid it is to answer it already. – Indifference is a form of rejection. – What will you do with Jesus?

He is not just asking what your parents think about Him, or your friends or others? – He is asking, ‘Who do YOU say that I am? What will you do with Jesus?’

Reread: v. 18...

+ People often say, ‘I think I’ll be saved in the end. I think my good will outweigh my bad, even if just barely. I’m banking on a good verdict from God in the end, I think I’ll be OK....’

Know what? – That’s irrelevant. – If you are unsaved, you are judged “already” (v. 18). – Not then, but now. – Not later or tomorrow, but today, “already”. –

Already the gavel has fallen, already the verdict has been pronounced. – Already your neck is on the guillotine, already the rope is around your neck as you stand on the gallows, already you are lying down, hands tied to the table, and the lethal injection is about to be administered. – WHY?...

Because final judgment was passed long ago. – Scripture says you were born in sin and conceived in iniquity:

Cf. Jn. 3:36b...

OT, “The soul that sins, it shall die.”

The verdict of Scripture is clear: Isa. 53:6a; Rom. 3:23; 5:12; Eph. 2:3...

→Therefore, my unsaved friend, you are “already” condemned from birth. – There is but one step between you and Hell. – God holds you over the fires of the Abyss by a spider’s web that could snap at any moment.

→NB: You *cannot blame* God for not electing you, or Jesus for not dying for you, or Christians for not witnessing to you. – You *can’t blame* Adam for passing down his sinful genes to you, or Satan for tempting you, or your parents for not teaching you the gospel. –

You can’t blame your spouse for not behaving, or your circumstances for not coming right. – No friend, the fault is 100% *yours* and yours alone IF you will not believe:

v. 18...

→WHY would you *not* believe? – All that sin & guilt piled up on your shoulders, all the curses from breaking God’s law, all that condemnation is on your head.–

YET: The moment you truly believe in Christ, ALL of it is removed, every last drop of guilt, and you are pardoned!

WHY cut yourself off from God’s great love, from His free forgiveness, from His glorious gift of eternal life?!...

Repeat: v. 18...

→Nothing *beside* faith is needed; nothing *except* faith will save you. *Without* faith there is no salvation; *through* faith in Jesus, the worst of sinners may be saved.

*The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.*

+ As Mark tells us about Jesus & the 4 friends of the paralytic who let him down through the roof: 2:5, “And Jesus seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” –

OR as Jesus said to the panicked disciples on the stormy sea, “Do you still have no faith?” (4:40). –

OR as Jesus said to the bleeding woman, and again to blind Bartimaeus, “your faith has healed you” (5:34; 10:52).

OR as Jesus said to the desperate father of the demon-possessed boy, “All things are possible to him who believes.” (9:23). –

OR most succinctly of all, Jesus said to Jairus’ whose daughter had just died, “Only believe”.

Repeat v. 18...

+ Harry Ironside tells of preaching in Scotland: One night after preaching, a pastor called Ironside over and said, “*Will you have a word with this lad?*” I sat down beside him and said, “*What is the trouble?*” He looked up and said, “*I canna see it. I canna see it. I am so burdened [by my sin & guilt], and canna find deliverance.*”

I said, "Have you been brought up in a Christian home?" He told me he had. "Do you know the way of salvation?" He answered, "Well, in a way, I do; but I canna see it." I said, "Let me show you something."

First I prayed with him and asked God, by the Holy Spirit, to open his heart. Then I pointed him to Jn. 3:18 and said, "Do you see those two classes of people? What is the first class? What is the second class?" He answered clearly: [those not condemned, and those condemned already].

"Now," I said, "which class are you in?" Then he looked at me and said, "Why, I am in the first class. I do believe in Him, but it is all dark. I canna see."

"Now look again," said I. "What does it say about the first class?" He did look again, and I could see the cloud lift.

He turned to me and exclaimed, "Man, I see it! I am not condemned." I asked, "How do you know?" He replied, "God said so."

His pastor said, "Well, lad, are you now willing to go home and tell your parents? Tomorrow when you go to work, will you be willing to tell your mates?" "Oh," he said, "I can hardly wait to get there."

→If you will NOT believe – realise who it is that you are rejecting: v. 18c... The almighty Christ, the eternal Word, God's co-Creator, the Light & the Life, the One of whom Heaven declared, 'This is My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased. Listen to Him'. – You are committing the most high-handed of all sins. – And:

You are saying that you can face God in court on your own, without an Advocate, without Another to Defend you, standing only on your own merit?!...

YET still some refuse; they ignore such a gift, still they won't believe (your loved ones, friends, co-workers, etc.)? – WHY is this?...

6. vv. 19-21, Jesus the Light: Love Him or Hate Him.

Again, no middle ground – *Two polar opposite reactions to Christ's light:*

v.19 – Someone has said, 'There are two wonders here in this passage – a wonder from above, and one from below: How amazing that God would so love the world that He gave His only Son; and how amazing that the world so *loved the darkness* as to reject God's gift of His Son.'

As we saw earlier: 1:10-11...

+ People love to give a thousand reasons why they won't come to Christ: 'O, but Christians are hypocrites. Churches are dead. Preachers are greedy. Christianity is a white man's religion. Evolution has proved the Bible false, or psychology or history, etc.'

People say, 'I've tried, but I just can't believe, until I have more proof, more evidence, more answers, more emotion, more time, etc.'

But the Bible says, 'No, that's not why you still don't believe, and if you had all those things, it wouldn't change your root problem:'

v. 19b, you love the darkness, you treasure sin, you delight in disobedience.

Please don't think that lost people are miserable in their sin and hating the darkness. – Sure, some of the symptoms & consequences of their sin may trouble them at times. –

But at the core, until they are born again, v. 19 is clear: 'they love the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds are evil'.

Instead of truth, they love lies. – Instead of purity, they love sensuality. – Instead of holiness, they love immorality. –

Instead of knowledge, they love ignorance. – Instead of freedom, they love bondage. – Instead of Heaven, they choose Hell.

WHY? – Because it's their very nature to love the darkness: Fish love water, birds love air, cows love grass, and sinners love sinning, and unbelievers love unbelief. – If you are unsaved, nothing comes more natural to you.

The world acts worldly because they are 'of the world' (cf. 1 John). – It's their natural habitat, their ethos, their environment. –

Sinners are never more at home than when they are in the darkness, ignorant of God, hating Christ, rejecting the gospel. –

Repeat: v. 19...

What's the result then?

v. 20 – You can't love sin's darkness and Christ's light at the same time. – It's always one or the other, never both. – If you're still lost, you may be polite about Jesus, respectful towards Christianity, or nice to the Church. –

But the fact remains, if you are unsaved, you "hate the Light", because you still have not truly repented & received Christ as your Saviour & Lord. – No, Jesus is still 'too much' for you. –

The light of His gospel is a glare that irritates you, it blinds your eyes, it makes you uncomfortable.

+ If you're unsaved, you're like those bugs under a brick or a rock: When it gets lifted up, and the light comes in, what do they all do?

They scatter. – Why? – Because they hate the light & love darkness....

Repeat: v. 20...

+ Like King Ahab in 1 Kings 22 in how he treated the one true prophet left, Micaiah. – Micaiah tells the king the truth, that if they go into battle, they'll be defeated. –

So Ahab replies, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?” – So one of the false prophets slaps Micaiah. – Then Ahab says, ‘Take him, lock him up!’

Repeat: v. 20...

Nobody likes being told their wrong. – But that’s what the truth of Christ does. – If you are a lost person, Jesus’ gospel:

...exposes your sin, He confronts your lifestyle, He calls you stop what you’re doing, to repent.

He wants to change your whole lifestyle, to wash you clean, make you new, “born again” (3:1-8).

+ During the days of the French Revolution, when the Bastille was about to be destroyed, a prisoner was released. – He had spent many years in a gloomy, dark cell. – When he was set free and came out into the light, he began begging his liberators to take him back to his dungeon. – He could not endure the sun’s light. – He’d rather have captivity than liberty, darkness over light. –

Plus, he said, his friends & family were all dead, he had no home, and his body was sore and aching. – All he wanted was to return to prison. (Or Beakley’s example of Brighton vs. Handsome....)

→My lost friend, that is you.... Repeat: v. 19...

→Another application: This is why a church’s job is to shine the light as bright as we can, with our lives and our worship & preaching: pointing people to Christ. –

If you are not yet saved, the most loving thing we can do is to unmask and expose you for who you truly are – to call you to decide about Christ – either to run away from Him or to run to Him and be saved – but not leaving any safe, middle ground or shadows & darkness for you still love your sin & keep coming to church....

+ Some people leave a strong church and go to a weak church for one reason (here’s why they duck & run): ‘I want some shade, I’m tired of being in the light’.... (That’s why membership matters....)

+ Man who sent a letter to 25 men in his town with this one short message: “All has been exposed. Flee at once.” – The next day, all 25 men had left town. (Prov. 28:1) – Talk about a guilty conscience!

Repeat: vv. 19-20...

BUT it doesn’t have to be that way! – You don’t have to behave like an insect or a creepy-crawly creature of the night. – Christ can change you (just as He will do to Nicodemus, bringing him out of the night, v. 2a)!

v. 21 – This is John’s way of describing Christian assurance. – This is NOT about salvation by works. – It’s about works that display salvation. – “coming to the Light” = coming to Christ for salvation.

NB, the saved person has *nothing* to hide. – Our life is an open book, a big billboard. – The more light you shine on me, the better.

Because it should allow you to see that the change in my life could never have come from me; only God could do this!: v. 21c...

→NB, Christians are not those who just know the truth, or speak the truth, or believe the truth. – No, we are those who: v. 21a, “practice/DO the truth”. – As Jesus said, ‘You will know them by their fruits’ (Matt. 7).

NB, This is **true, saving faith**. – There are many other faiths, and much false faith today, especially IN the Church. – Many claim to ‘believe’, but bear no fruit and do not (v. 21) “practice the truth” or have any “deeds/works” to show it. – That is a false, demonic faith.

But John’s Gospel was written to teach us about true “faith”. – Did you know the word “believe” is used 98x in John’s Gospel, almost 3x more than all three other Gospels combined?! –

Recall John’s entire purpose & theme verse: 20:31...

Did you also know – *not one* of those 98 uses is a noun?! – It’s always a verb! – And that’s usually because it is a living, active, genuine faith on display.

For John, faith is never a passive thing. – Here’s how we’ll see John defining true, saving faith for us: 3:19, it = ‘loving the Light’, vv. 20-21, ‘coming to the Light’, v. 21, ‘practicing the truth’; “obeying the Son” (3:36).

In Jn. 6, we’ll see that true faith = an appetite, eating, drinking, feasting by faith on the person of Christ who alone can satisfy us. – Jn. 8:12, faith = ‘following Christ’. –

Jn. 15, true faith = abiding, continuing, remaining, bearing fruit.

This is because true faith = a relationship. – As we saw in 2:24, faith = “entrusting yourself” – entering into a real, personal, living relationship with Christ. – Not just believing *about* Jesus, but believing *in & upon* Jesus wholly!

→Lost sinner, WHY would you not come to Christ’s Light? – You are like a traveller passing through a dangerous & deserted country:

You’ve lost your way, you’ve wandered far from the main road. Night overtakes you. – The storm rages, the winds howl, the rain pours down, the storm thunders. – The lightning points out for you the dangerous ledges & cliffs all around. – You are in grave danger.

YET in the distance, you see a faint light. – You move closer. – You see a little home, with their lamps lit, and the fireplace glowing. At last, you’ve found shelter & warmth, safety & security.

What then do you do? – Do you run the other way into certain danger and death?! – Insane!

Sinner, you are that traveller. – This lost world is a wilderness. You are in danger of the wrath of God. – You are the plaything of Satan, a captive of sin, and the precipice of eternal Hell itself.

YET Light has come into the world! – Christ has come, not to condemn you, but to save you! –

Repeat: Jn. 3:16...

CONCL. – Restate 6 points (w/title)...

HOW could there be a more all-embracing, all-inclusive word than this (vv. 15-16)?: “Whoever believes”. – It reaches out to you, to me, to us all, to our city, our country, our continent, our world! – “Whoever believes!”

YET still most will refuse....

→Realise this: There is another “whoever” in the Bible. – Rev. 20:15, “Whoever was not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the Lake of Fire.” –

What a terrifying threat: That if you reject the ‘whoever’ of John 3, you will face the ‘whoever’ of Rev. 20:15....

+ D.L. Moody tells this story: During the American Civil War there was a man on one of the boat-loads of wounded soldiers, coming back from the field. – He was very depressed, and in a kind of stupor. – And nobody knew him, so no relatives had yet been contacted.

Mr. Moody called him by different names, but could get no response. – At last, at the name “William,” the man opened his eyes for the first time, looked up, and revived.

Moody asked if he was a Christian. – William said, “No,” but with signs of great distress and anxiety. – He then said, “I am so great a sinner that I can’t be a Christian.”

Mr. Moody told him he would read what Christ said about that, so turning to John 3, he read, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

“Stop!” said the dying man; “read that over again, will you?” – So Moody did so. – “Are you sure that is in the Bible?,” the man asked. – “Yes,” Moody replied, “I am reading to you straight from Scripture.”

“And did Christ say that?,” the man asked. – “Yes”, said Moody.

So the soldier began repeating the words: “that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

He laid back upon his pillow as he did so, with a strange, solemn look of peace on his face. – He paid no attention to all that was going on around him; he just kept repeating those amazing words till Mr. Moody left him.

The next morning Moody came to visit William, but his bed was empty. – He asked if anyone knew what happened to him. – A nurse who had spent the hours with him till he died replied, “All the time I was with him he was repeating something about Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness. I asked him if there was anything I could do for him, but he only answered, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent.’

“Just before he died, about midnight, I saw his lips moving, though there was no sound escaping. I thought he might have some dying message for home, so I asked him for one. But the only answer was the whispered words, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him--’ and so on until his voice died away, and his lips moved no longer.”

PRAY

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it significant that Jesus did not choose to come to earth, but that He was sent?
2. How is it that Jesus was sent to save, yet He will also be judge and all the unsaved will be condemned?
3. What is it about the identity of God’s Son that makes rejecting Him so eternally costly and damnable?
4. What makes John 3:18 such magnificent news for the believer? What are some other verses that echo this same assurance?
5. Why do people reject Christ’s light? How have you responded to the light of the gospel?
6. Is v. 21 teaching a works-based salvation? If not, explain. How does John’s Gospel define saving faith? What are some synonyms for true, saving faith, even just here in John 3?